

# Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

\*\*\*\*\*

## Voice

*Problem: There is no voice here!*

### Strategies:

1. **Encourage students to think "I".** Many teachers object to the use of the personal pronoun "I" in informational or persuasive pieces, and with reason. The problem is that writing can become so impersonal that it is difficult to sense anyone behind the words.
2. **Make it dramatic.** Readers can not survive on facts alone. They need some drama to stay interested. Check out Sneed Collard non-fiction books and how he takes what could be boring, and makes it interested.
3. **Get someone talking.** We can only plod so long through text in which no one lives, breathes, or speaks. If you're not using dialogue, use a quote to satisfy a reader's natural longing for human contact.
4. **Have a good time.** Voice comes from loving the writing you are doing and daring to be a little playful about it.
5. **Lighten up.** Not everyone has the talent to be funny in their writing. Instead try using a light touch. Make it sound like you are friendly, engaged, and bemused in your writing.
6. **Bring the reader inside.** Not only do students need to identify the audience but they need to try and "bring them in". Find a way to make him or her home in the text. Bill Nye is a genius for this. He writes as if he's inviting his readers in for tea and physics.
7. **Listen for moments.** Voice comes and goes in writing. Listen for just those right moments in a student's writing and comment on it. Once they know that their voice has touched someone, it's hard not to want to do it again. If they hear us react, laugh, gasp, applaud, cheer, etc. they'll know that their risk taking has made a difference - even if only for a line.

\*\*\*\*\*

some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and  
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog

8. **Personalize the topic.** When writer's respond to someone else's topic (such as state-wide writing prompts), they need to take it and make it their own. How? They need to stretch it, bend it, and coax it into a slightly different form. For example, when writing about a memorable place, you could write about "inside my grandma's eyes". Now that is taking the notion of place to a whole new dimension. When writing about a memorable person, students often think about parents, grandparents, friends, or siblings. But how about writing about the dangerous driver you encounter on the freeway, a person who you can't get out of your head, an annoying neighbor, the class bully from years ago, and actor whose performance moved you, the inventor of something you value, someone from history you wish you could have met, or a stranger who did a good deed. You've got to move the fence line out...out...

9. **Take voice out.** By taking the voice out of a strong piece, students often discover what made it strong in the first place.

10. **Write to your best listener.** Think about someone that you'd share your most valuable secrets with. Write as if you were writing just to that person.

11. **Try role playing.** Give your students a situation and a set of characters such as: a pilot writing home during WWII or a Japanese child in an interment camp writing to a non-Japanese friend during WWII.

12. **Add "Gold Nuggets".** These are small treasures that add voice and style. Gold nuggets might include:

- a quote
- an amazing fact or statistic
- an anecdote
- a description
- a very short sentence
- a question or exclamation

**Problem:** *This voice doesn't work for the topic or the audience.*

**Strategies:**

1. **Switch audiences.** Students gain a sense of audience by writing for more than one person or group. Ask students to imagine an uncomfortable situation like getting caught in a lie. Then ask them to write about this incident to several different audiences such as their parents, a good friend, a teacher, a judge, etc. Does the voice change as the audience shifts? Why?

\*\*\*\*\*

*some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and  
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog*

2. **Get an attitude.** Actors often approach a scene from a particular attitude. It helps to do this in writing, too. What attitudes are you projecting? Helpful? Authoritative? Sorrowful? Joyous? Amazed? Get into the mood of your writing.

3. **Take time to vent.** Almost everyone has an issue with some local business group or other. Express your concerns in letters. The complaint letter is a challenge. You need to hit the right note: serious protest coupled with a professional, courteous undertone. If your students can hit that just-right blend, they have a leg up on achieving good business voice. Save letters (and responses, if you get them) and compile them into a class book entitled, *Effective Business Voices*.

4. **Interview businesspeople.** If possible, invite local businesspeople into your classroom to talk directly to your students. Find out how they want their employees to come across to the audiences they serve. You might find out that the quality of voice - warmth, friendliness, a personal touch - is more valued than ever.

5. **Write for yourself, too.** We do our best writing when we write something we actually might want to read to ourselves a month or year from now.

6. **Relax.** Tension is the mortal enemy of voice. If you can relax as you write, the *self* is more likely to emerge. Be yourself. Say what you think. Readers appreciate it - and it makes your writing stand out.

7. **Point of view.** Tell stories from different perspectives or for different audiences. Discuss the different voices. For example, describe a piece of chocolate cake from

- a person on a strict diet
- a hungry kid after school
- a stern nutritionist

\*\*\*\*\*

some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and  
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog